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ABSTRACT

Because rural communities have different needs and resources from those found in urban settings, nontraditional education programs provide alternatives to those features of modern mass education that respond primarily to urban needs. This digest looks at a few nontraditional programs and strategies, the problems to which they respond, and the features that make them successful. Rural problems include sparsity of population, motivating minority students toward higher achievement, and meeting the needs of special populations: the handicapped, the gifted, and juvenile offenders. Alternatives examined include setting up free universities in small communities, bilingual and multicultural education programs, rural outdoor education programs, multi-media General Equivalency Diploma (GED) preparation, and home schooling. Generally, the people who create innovative programs are community leaders and parents. Well defined needs, self-starting learners, and cooperation among educational units characterize successful alternative programs. The most important characteristic, however, is that programs be community-based, born of necessity rather than technological expediency. Contains 10 references. (DHP)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools March 1989

Nontraditional Education in Rural Districts

Digest EDO-RC-89-8

RURAL communities in particular have different needs and resources from those found in urban settings. Many observers believe that the features of modern mass education, which evolved in response to urban needs, make it difficult to address the educational needs of rural people. Non-traditional education programs have been one response of educators and citizens to the growing consensus that alternatives to the urban model are needed in rural areas.

Nontraditional programs cover a variety of services that are not typical of modern schooling. They may be offered in schools, or they may take place outside the school setting. Nontraditional programs feature innovative or flexible arrangements for instruction, modified or original curriculum and courses, and flexible grading or degree requirements. In rural areas, nontraditional programs often embody a community-level response to perceived needs.

Whether undertaken as public or private efforts, nontraditional alternatives have succeeded by matching innovative educational services with real community needs. They have been undertaken at all educational levels in rural areas. This digest will look at a few nontraditional programs and strategies, the problems to which they respond, and the features that make them successful.

What kinds of rural problems do alternatives address?

For most rural populations, educational problems arise primarily from the sparsity of rural population. Alternatives—that is, choices in available services—are few, and in many rural areas even traditional schools experience financial problems. These problems make it difficult to meet local needs in rural areas.

One source commends home schooling as a possible solution for educators concerned with the rising financial costs of transporting students and maintaining centralized school plants (McAvoy, 1986). Other alternatives—for example, in adult education—represent an attempt by traditional institutions, such as rural colleges and universities, to provide more accessible services to the populations they serve.

Motivating minority students toward higher achievement has been an issue confronted by many rural schools, according to Benally, Cole, and Quezada-Aragon (1987). Hispanic and American Indian students, along with other minority groups in rural communities, have been plagued by low grades, high dropout rates, and high rates of illiteracy.

Special populations in rural areas—the handicapped, the gifted, and juvenile offenders, for example—have specific educational needs, as do students who have faced frustration and difficulty in typical rural school settings (Elliot, 1975). Often, the low incidence of such students strains both the human and financial resources of rural school districts.

What alternatives have rural communities tried in response to these problems?

The University For Man (UM), a project of Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, has experienced some success in setting up "free universities" in small communities. Based on these successes, UM offers a guide for setting up adult education programs in small cities and towns of any size. The manual describes the specific steps to start a program, using community resources and requiring little or no expense for students and volunteer teachers (Embers et al., 1980).

Bilingual and multicultural education programs have been offered as a way to meet the special needs of minority and high-risk students. The multicultural Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon, for example, has programs that allow counselors, social workers, tutors, and a school psychologist to work with students in their dorms (Chemawa Indian School, 1987). High-risk children of migrant workers have also been the beneficiaries of programs to improve counseling services, raise enrollment rates, increase educational monitoring, and encourage family support.

Rural outdoor education programs have been used to address the specific educational needs of the handicapped, juvenile offenders, the gifted, and ethnic minority students. Outdoor education enables youngsters to participate in a "total" learning experience (Benally et al., 1987). Other "special needs" programs are marked by a less-structured atmosphere, a lower student-teacher ratio, or the use of problem-solving strategies in teaching (Elliot, 1975).

Project "GRADS" (Grass Roots Alternative Diploma Study) in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, was a yearlong multi-media approach used in one county to prepare rural residents for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED). The program began as an attempt to create a correspondence course for prison inmates. It was made available to a wider population when educational programs were broadcast countywide over cable TV and weekly GED lessons were printed in a local newspaper. The GRADS program successfully reached a large number of rural residents, including many jobless people who wanted their high school equivalency diploma.

"GRADS" was also able to provide remedial materials on an as-needed basis; staff traditional adult basic education and GED programs; make GED testing more accessible to outlying areas; establish a first-of-its-kind graduation ceremony for GED graduates; effectively link private and public sectors in a team effort; encourage adults to return to school; and pave the way for future adult education efforts (Kimmel & Lucas, 1984).

Home schooling is an alternative for as many as 260,000 students, while anywhere from 50,000 to 150,000 students follow a curriculum designed by their own parents (Lines, 1986). Home schooling seems to be especially attractive as a viable alternative to

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centralized school systems for families in rural areas like Appalachia (McAvoy, 1986). McAvoy describes one family's experience with home schooling, illustrating how the children demonstrated significantly high achievement scores on standardized tests.

Who are the people creating alternatives?

Generally, the people who create innovative programs are community leaders (official and informal) and those who are most affected by educational inadequacies: parents. Leadership is a key ingredient to any successful program and the most effective community leaders have both credibility and an accurate sense of educational needs in rural communities (McLaurin & Coker, 1986).

The people educating their children at home are a diverse group, but they appear to share at least one trait—a firm belief that parents can and should be deeply involved in the education and development of their own children. Self-motivation is obviously important in home schooling. Home-school parents, almost by definition, are do-it-yourselfers (Lines, 1986).

What makes alternative programs successful?

Successful distance education programs usually begin slowly, with well defined needs, and then grow to address other needs, according to Barker (1987). The most effective and lasting rural educational programs are created when both agencies and communities work actively and purposefully together. While linkages with existing education offices and other local agencies are important to an alternative program's survival, the impetus, planning, and execution must begin at the local level (McLaurin & Coker, 1986).

Distance education programs are good recent examples of the cooperative interaction of rural educators with state and regional organizations to provide nontraditional solutions for unmet rural needs. Distance education entails programs that deliver instruction through correspondence courses, interactive satellite broadcasts, or electronic networks among rural schools, but most recent work has focused on the latter two alternatives.

Such alternatives require cooperation among rural school districts, regional service providers, and state departments of education. In successful implementations rural educators define the needs of their students clearly and work with service originators and state department personnel to work out technical problems. The effectiveness of distance education is not, however, based on technical solutions. Independent, self-starting learners are an essential part of the formula; so is a clear sense of local needs (Batey & Cowell, 1986).

The GRADS program, according to Kimmel and Lucas (1984), did not depend on a large budget, but entirely on countywide volunteer cooperation. Similarly, the UM adult education programs depended on people and projects that came at little or no initial expense (Embers et al., 1980). Cooperation is also important in successful home schooling, according to Lines (1986). Flexible scheduling, providing materials for home study, and the cooperation of parents in the assessment of their children are all features that can help such an arrangement benefit both the school and the children whose parents exercise this option.

Conclusion

Questions of size and scope cannot be addressed without taking the community needs into consideration. Alternative education projects in rural areas are most successful as community-based programs, born of necessity rather than technological expediency (for example, Batey & Cowell, 1986). The sense of community needs and good leadership hold a successful rural alternative education program together and allow it to grow.

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